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THE BOOK OF SYMBOLS  
HENRY A. WISE WOOD

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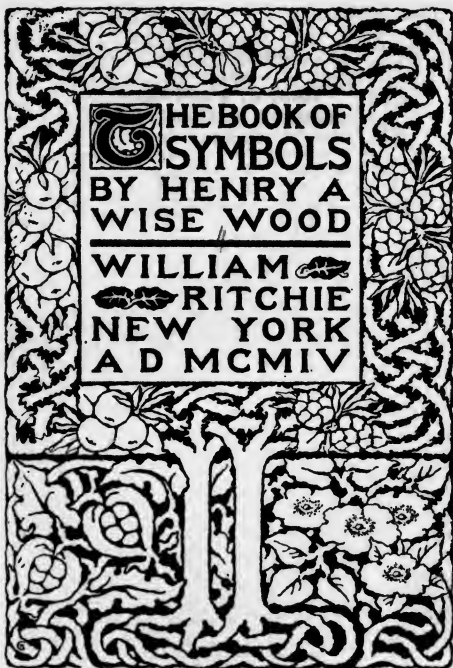






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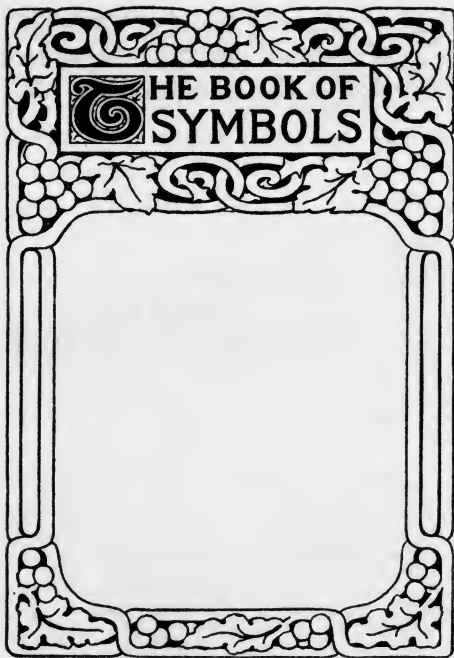
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N early youth I had from my Mother a Casket curiously fashioned, and of many precious metals. Quaint, animate carvings of ancient scenes were upon its sides: the Garden of Eden; an elaborate edifice which seemed to span the void between earth

and heaven ; the Crucifixion. These, showing the labor and the wear of ages, were wrought with exquisite skill.

Upon the cover of the Casket were carven a firebrand and a stake, and between them the mouth of a pit. The latter was conceived in so singular a fashion that looking never so far into its depths one could not fathom it. Above ran the words: *This is Hell, approach it not, for they who disclose its mystery are taken of a sickness, and all things change in their sight.* To me this inscription seemed terrible ; I dared not gaze into the pit, and, when the box rested with its cover uppermost, I

held my hand over it, for I was afraid.

Underneath, also, the box was of strange designing. Out of the center of the bottom peered an eye, like the sun, and from it rays shot to all of the corners of the Casket, and round about its sides, and upwardly over the edges of its top; while from all of the sides of the cover these rays gathered, and poured into the very mouth of hell.

Into the eye I feared to look, for over it, too, was an inscription that made me shrink in terror from its words: *The Eye of God sees, but it may not be seen; peer not into its depths,*

*nor attempt the mysteries within it, for he who reveals the Unknown shall be cast out of the haunts of men.* The cruelty of the punishment shook me; I feared lest I might see, and so I ever held the box with its bottom from me. If, inadvertently, I should meet the eye, and penetrate its mysteries—how awful would be the cost!

So I bore the Casket close between my hands; the one above, the other beneath it. I would have hidden it, had I not been charged to bear it reverently, patiently, faithfully; or have wrapped it out of sight in the folds of my garments, had the scenes upon its

sides not held me so bound that I could not withdraw myself from the strange influences which they wielded.



**U**PON one panel it bore a mystic nature scene: a deep forest crowned two rolling hills; between the hills a valley of luxuriant undergrowth, part lighted, part dark; and in the midst thereof a clear, cool stream, with sloping green borders of moss. Overhead, the outreaching branches of the wood waved in the wind,

and in waving shook the long strands of sunlight which kindled the many hues of the depths beneath. Here, by the water, half screened by the glistening foliage of its brink, rested a man and a woman; and as their voices mingled with the r-u-u-l-l of the brook, there came to me out of the picture its transcendent meanings.

The woman and the man had lived, wandered, and dreamed; together they had come through the lowlands, over the highlands, into the forest; had seen the clouds and the sea, the sunrise and the noon, the sunset and the coming of the stars; they had plucked the flowers of the earth and trod the



gardens of the sky, and now they had come by the brook and were resting. They had seen all, and it had wearied them.

The woman said: *How beautiful it is*,—and their eyes drank the glories of the valley—*and how peaceful*. The swirl of the water made music of the thought, and they listened.

Said the man: *How good is the shade*,—the shafts of sunlight sped afar off down the stream—*and the solitude, how deep!*—the sounds of the wood fell away—*How soft the moss*,—the tendrils of their couch pressed tiny fingers to his side—*and how sweet is the odor of your hair!*

The woman sighed. *It is all so beautiful, and you are a part of it, . . . and I am a part of it. I seem to see you, and yet to see with you; we are alike, yet unlike. You please me, as all else pleases me, and—the warmth of your body attracts me.*

Her words floated off; the woman and the man lay close together, and the breeze bore her hair across the intervening space. The clouds as they passed unnoticed overhead varied the shadows cast by her limbs upon the moss.

The man watched her; the dark background of the forest threw into relief the delicately

modelled outlines of her form. Where the perception of companionship alone had reigned, there now stole in upon him a sense of something overlooked. The soft hues of the woman, the rhythm of the undulations of her body, the beauty of the hand that lay palm-uppermost between them—unfolding, like a lily upon the green surface of a lake—the glistening arm, the shoulder, the neck; the warmth and the fullness of life which they bespoke; these, all of these, stole in upon the man,—and he knew that there were secrets in the unopened volume of woman, which awaited but the turning of the title-page.

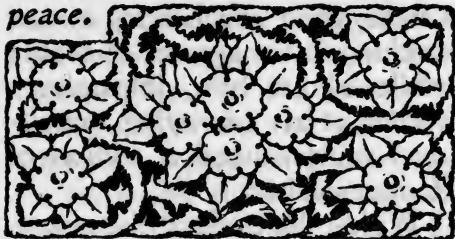


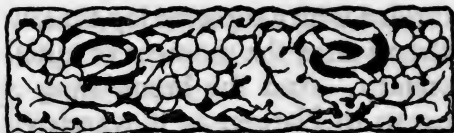
A tense, unbroken silence drew about them; the wood seemed to gather its children and stand afar off, the sky and its filmy cloud-forms faded into the realms of the unseen, the moist, soft bank upon which they lay passed from their senses, and the r-u-u-l-l of the stream as it swept from their hearing lent its throb to the flood that was coursing their veins.

The woman understood, and trembled, and the petals of her hand quivered in the green moss: the current of a new yearning had sprung within her; she felt it flood her lips, her throat, her breasts; felt it thrust aside the consciousness of all outward being, and,

thrilled with a supreme joy, timidly she awaited the moment of initial ecstasy. And the brook sang a paean to Nature, as it wandered away to the sea.

This scene, I loved; and was never weary of looking at it. Nevertheless, it was evil, for an inscription called it the *Beginning of Evil*, and said: *Having peace, Man sought pleasure—and, finding pleasure, ne'er again had peace.*





**U**PON another side of the Casket was a knoll, to which a squalid, dreary looking city of the East lent a background of low, primitive dwellings; and upon the knoll was gathered a curious array of people. In the midst of them rose a stake, upon which hung a man writhing in the agonies of death; while about him, impassively holding at bay a swaying, tumultuous rabble, stood a cordon of Roman soldiers.

Within the circle of the guard,

their faces strained and their eyes streaming, a group of men in anguish watched the sufferings of their leader, and at his feet, shaken with grief, there knelt a woman weeping. Passing to and fro, intent upon their duties, stolidly moved those of the soldiery who were charged with the work of execution.

Over this scene there hung an atmosphere of suspense, accentuated by the cries of the throng, by the low-spoken words of the executioners, by the sobs of the woman, or by the moans of the now scarce struggling figure at the stake. As the laughter and jeers of the mob died away, and

more distant sounds made themselves heard, the tension seemed to grow unendurable, and many of those who mutely watched turned from the sufferings they beheld. The baying of dogs in the town, the herd-cries from the hills round about, the routine noises from distant habitations, all these served to throw over the cruel spectacle a veil of utter commonplace, and to lend to the killing of this man, the world's gentle Egotist, an aspect of infinite dreariness.

The inscription of this picture I could neither clearly see, nor wholly understand; it was of strange characters, in part effaced,



but this much was I able to read:  
*and he who would uplift, first  
humbly must yield.*

This carving, my Mother had said, was of the Atonement, an expiation of the evil of the world, of which the root was depicted upon another side of the Casket. This was not plain to me, but I accepted it, and regarded the subject with reverent awe, as a matter that was not to be scrutinized, nor inquired into. Nevertheless, like the altar-lamp at a shrine, burned without ceasing the question: *If beauty be truth, and love be right, and to live be good, why needed to be atoned that which I had seen upon an opposite panel of the box?*



**B**ETWEEN the forest and the tragedy, upon a third surface of the Casket, was a far, wide plain, that seemed to reach towards me from out the dusk of the very beginning of things human. Dotting its horizon were rude heaps of fallen stones, shattered temples of long-forgotten cults, whose blocks and pillars, scarce shapen by hand, were but dimly visible through the gray mists shrouding the plain upon which they lay.

Strewn hither and thither over its dim expanse, their cloisters fantastically interwoven, in the distance crude and timid in design, but ever as they neared me growing in power and beauty, pile succeeded to pile, structure to structure, bespeaking Faith's many culminations. Each seemed to have risen upon the ground of Man's necessity, and proudly in turn to have trumpeted the challenge: *I SHALL SATISFY!*

Among these ruins was every fashion of Man's art of building; in each he had expressed, as in him best it lay, his awe in the presence of the All-Mysterious. By thrusting toward the skies

with all his might his loftiest deeds of beauty, he had sought to do obeisance, and to propitiate the dreaded Hand, which he felt, but could not see. Blood, treasure, and thought, feverishly he had spent, and out of his very abasement, springing from his humility, and nurtured while he lay prone upon earth, one hand beating his breast, the other timidly fashioning, blossomed and bloomed the exotic which we call Art.

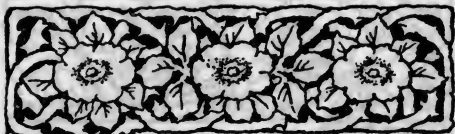
Forth from every portion of the plain; from each fallen pile, from structures shaken with Time's ague, and from others of more modern mould, the while I

watched, came spirits dumbly moving into line. Each bore, in hands, on back, or dragged behind with ropes, a brick, a stone, a pillar, to a spot where other spirits dumbly set these up, and builded, wide and high, in its thews a bit of every ancient fane, a towering edifice whose rising bastions cleft the mists, to shame the dazzling splendor of our noon-day sun.

Round about this temple wailed the World, and lavished upon its altars blood, and gold, and thought; and daily the World slew itself that the crimson-bannered battlements might greet the sun full rich in Man's life-color, thus vaunting

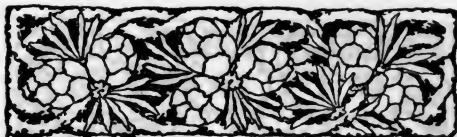
its God's debt to Man, for Man's self-sacrifice.

So ran the strange fancy wrought by this picture, which I had been taught to revere, to love, and to cleave to in hours of trouble. Its edifice had been called the *Rock upon which is founded all good; the World's refuge from evil*, and, within its archives only, I had been told, lay all of the past that bore worth for the future. Bent upon seeking asylum, many times had my spirit approached its open portals, but the sounds within — the clank of golden chains — had startled it, and each time wearily my spirit withdrew.



**S**O, I continued to wander, my Mother's gift carefully borne between my hands, yearningly looking upon the woodland picture, notwithstanding I had been taught that it was the root of all pain.





**T**HE fourth surface of the box was polished; in it, as in a mirror, often, uncannily, I saw things which resembled my own thoughts, and could watch them struggling out of the huge chaos of youth, into the simple order of maturity.

This side of the Casket unceasingly held me in its magic spell, and the transformations which it reflected blenched me at times with horror. In its mysterious depths I could see a cold finger



touch, one after another, things long held dear to my heart and passionately cherished by me ; things which, at its approach, drooped or vanished, or, suddenly sprang into new shape, and took their places as mere elements in the tremendous hypothesis which was forming within me—forming at the cost of such heavy travail.

Loved conceptions would become misconceptions, while inherited beliefs, affectionately nurtured, fled at the chill touch of that inexorable finger. Heartsick and weary, with all my soul's strength, often I prayed to possess once again youth's sunlit, trustful

hours, and its mother-taught, safe-guarding formulas; and, finally, one day, I thrust from me the haunting mirror with its phantom hand!

But the finger drew me back to the dread phantasmagoria; I could not escape it; the threads of the hypothesis must be spun, each must take its place, and, although it serve as shroud to, the dearest heart-held belief that lay hidden in my breast, the fabric must be fully woven. Then, weak with dread, again I looked, and, lo! it was finished; the hypothesis was formed, and it lay before me complete in every element. The phantasms had fled, and in

their stead was a sweep of tranquil sky; my travail was spent, and, freed by the magic touch of thought from the puny thralldom of a Plan, in the clear light of the Indisputable — which men call Truth — I saw, with a fierce joy, fierce as the joy of battle, which is sweeter than all youth's ecstasies, *Nature, the Juggernaut, unhasting, unthinking, heedlessly onward-rolling upon its inexorable mission of consequence.*





**T**HE Casket was now quivering in my grasp, the crimson-bannered, sun-shot battlements were crumbling to the ground; the Castle of Fear had fallen, and, as through a golden mist, up from its shattered corridors arose the wondrous arts of Color, Form, and Sound, the World's inheritance, its richest legacies of Faith. The scene of the Crucifixion had vanished—in vain had the twin spirits Ignorance and Intolerance striven to quench in the hearts of

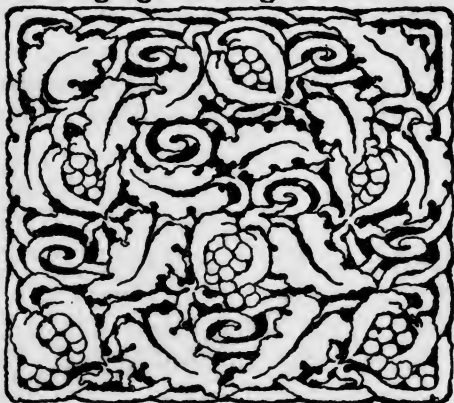
men the spark out of which Thought and Compassion were summoning the love of kind—and in its stead stood there the spirit of Eternal Kindness, saying: *Condemn not, lest the flames of resentment consume the vessel in which they burn. Ye cannot reach the ancestry of this day's misdeeds, but the morrow's worth waits upon its inheritance—therefore, garner ye all good.*

Then, with a wrench, as if it were being torn from me by all of the hands of Time, the Casket leapt from my grasp, and lay at my feet, open. The ground trembled and rocked, as if in the throes of convulsion, and out of the Cas-

ket there sprang a Man, facing the level rays of the new-day's sun, firm-eyed and strong, one hand aloft to command his fate, while with the other he thrust back to their graves the grim hordes of the past, hugging their implements of terror, worship, and propitiation.

And up from their knees to Man's full height rose other men, stripping from death its hideous jest of life, and gazing with fearless eyes into the sun. Unawed by the menace of the Universe, these grasped the earth and bent it to their need; wrung from its tardy lips new, frank, replies, and conjured from every firmamental star its seething tribute to Man's master mind.

From its slumber of untold centuries the World seemed suddenly to have waked, and at a bound to have passed from beneath the sombre clouds of savagery, barbarism, and civilization, out into the clear dawn of the god-un-needing age of enlightenment.









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